

Issue Brief: Women's Issues in Native American Communities

Key Words (4-6)

Women, Sexual Assault, Prevention, Government, Native American Tribes

Description

This brief focuses on issues facing Native American women, particularly the high rates of sexual assault and rape they experience as compared to other ethnic groups and the efforts being taken to remedy and minimize attacks against women. In addition, lacking comprehensive information on modern Native American cultural practices and political ideology is also discussed.

Key Points (4-6)

- Native American women face one of the highest rates of sexual assault, abuse and rape out of any ethnic or racial group in the United States
- Significant differences in factors involved in attacks, such as alcohol/drug use by the attacker and the race/ethnicity of attacker exist between attacks against Native Americans and other racial/ethnic groups
- The reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act in 2013 is meant to enable Native American communities to better prosecute non-tribal sex offenders that attack on tribal land
- The diversity of Native American tribes and the minimal data available on tribal life makes it difficult to accurately analyze cultural and political trends among Native Americans, particularly among Native American women

Issue Brief:

The history of Native Americans peoples is long and complex. From exploitation, forced assimilation, and the development of the reservation system, Native Americans relations with U.S. policy and governmental forces have been equally as complicated. Steps have been taken by the federal government to remedy past wrongs, but negative affects still linger, particularly on reservations, where economic depression, poor health care and alcoholism ravage communities. While federal attention has been increasingly directed to the needs in Native American communities, Native American women are in the most need of bolstered support. Not only do they face the economic and health challenges known to be prevalent on reservations, they are one of the groups most heavily affected by sexual abuse in the U.S.

According to the United States Office of Violence Against Women, Native American women are 2.5 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than women of other racial and ethnic groups (Tjaden & Thoennes, 23). In addition, “one in three Native American women are raped during their lifetime” (5). While not all Native American women are raped, over two thirds of Native American women surveyed in 1999 reported being physically assaulted (5). Yet, despite having the highest rates of sexual abuse and the highest rates of reporting abuse to authorities, Native American women are less likely to see their attackers face criminal charges or prison than are women of white or African American background (199).

Statistics on sexual violence towards Native American women shows significantly different trends from other racial and ethnic groups. In particular, alcohol and drugs appear to play a critical role in attacks on Native American women. 68% of Native American victims reported that they believed their attacker was under the influence, compared to 34% and 35% of White and African American women, respectively (Kallmyer 212). Another difference between Native American victims and those of other ethnic groups is the demographics of the attackers. It is more common for attacks against Native American women to be “interracial,” with nearly 70% of perpetrators against Native American women not being Native American themselves, while for White and African American women it is more commonly “intra-racial” (212).

The lack of protection both on the local and federal level for Native American women has been brought to the forefront by the federal government’s “reauthorization” of the 1998 Violence Against Women Act. (VAWA) Led by the Department of Justice and signed into law by President Obama in early 2013, the act is aimed at protecting all

women but now includes a clause specific to Native American women that grants tribes more control over prosecution of non-Native Americans who commit crimes on their land (Reilly). This clause is meant to ensure the persecution of offenders against Native American women and better protection for victims (Reilly). This clause stems from lacking federal persecution of Native American sex offenses and is meant to enable local governments to better ensure support and protection of native women. Due to the reenactment of VAWA being so recent it will take time to examine whether these new amendments are effective at protecting Native American women.

Sexual assault is far from the only significant issue affecting Native American women, but lacking data makes it difficult to track other qualities of Native American life, such as women's community role, political affiliation and participation trends, cultural values, etc. For example, in chapter three of McClain & Stewart's *Can We All Get Alone: Racial and Ethnic Minorities in American Politics* it is noted the low amount of knowledge of Native American political ideology in comparison to other ethnoracial minority groups. In addition, with over 566 federally recognized native tribes each with their own history, traditions and rituals it is inaccurate to cluster all Native American women's experiences together. Each tribe is "ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse" and outside of statistics on sexual assault, and generally consistent high rates of poverty, alcoholism and drug abuse affect native communities at large, there is lacking research into other common qualities of different native tribes (National Congress of Native American Indians).

Work Cited

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Relevant Websites

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<http://www.indianlaw.org/>

http://www.ncai.org/resources/ncai_publications/policy-insights-brief-statistics-on-violence-against-native-women

<http://www.ovw.usdoj.gov/tribal.html>

Images:

Table 2.3
Lifetime Prevalence of Sexual Violence by Race/Ethnicity¹ — U.S. Women, NISVS 2010

		Hispanic	Non-Hispanic				
			Black	White	Asian or Pacific Islander	American Indian or Alaska Native	Multiracial
Rape	Weighted %	14.6	22.0	18.8	*	26.9	33.5
	Estimated Number of Victims ²	2,202,000	3,186,000	15,225,000		234,000	452,000
Other sexual violence	Weighted %	36.1	41.0	47.6	29.5	49.0	58.0
	Estimated Number of Victims ²	5,442,000	5,967,000	38,632,000	1,673,000	424,000	786,000

¹Race/ethnicity was self-identified. The American Indian or Alaska Native designation does not indicate being enrolled or affiliated with a tribe.
²Rounded to the nearest thousand.
 *Estimate is not reported; relative standard error >30% or cell size ≤ 20.

Source: The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey 2010 Summary Report (http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_executive_summary-a.pdf)



Source: The National Park Service Indian Reservations in the Continental United States (<http://www.nps.gov/nagpra/documents/RESERV.PDF>)